

HOW CHARACTER FLAWS IN DEUTERAGONISTS AMPLIFY THE CHARACTER ARC OF PROTAGONISTS: VINCE GILLIGAN'S REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

TiTan Zhong

Guangdong Country Garden School, Foshan 528300, Guangdong, China.

Corresponding Email: trzhongtitan@outlook.com

Abstract: This study explores Vince Gilligan's innovative approach to character development in *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, focusing on how Vince Gilligan uses moral ambiguity and the lack of clear motivation of deuteragonists as a key element in orchestrating the development of the main character. Through a detailed comparative analysis of the scripts, it examines how Jesse's conflicted morality and lack of clear motivation accentuate Walter's descent into megalomania, while Kim's ethical wavering and inconsistent motives complicate Jimmy's transformation into Saul Goodman. This paper highlights the distinct narrative roles of these deuteragonists, showing how their character flaws serve as catalysts and foils for the protagonists' development journeys. By leveraging the moral complexity of secondary characters, Vince Gilligan creates emotionally resonant and ethically fraught narratives that challenge traditional distinctions between hero and villain.

Keywords: Breaking bad; Better call saul; Character development; Deuteragonist

1 INTRODUCTION

Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* and its prequel *Better Call Saul* are renowned for their complex characters and ethically fraught story lines. Both series feature protagonists, namely Walter White and Jimmy McGill respectively, whose transformations hinge on relationships with key secondary characters, or called deuteragonists.

This article examines how Gilligan deliberately imbues the deuteragonists – Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad* and Kim Wexler in *Better Call Saul* – with moral ambiguity and unclear motivations, using them to catalyze and deepen the protagonists' development. Moral ambiguity employed in this article refers to characters who display both virtuous and villainous traits without a clear ethical alignment [1], and lack of clear motivation denotes characters whose goals or drives are not explicitly defined by the narrative [2]. The two series and their central characters are reviewed in the next section, followed by an analysis of Gilligan's approach to character construction.

In *Breaking Bad*, this research explores Jesse Pinkman's ambivalent morality and indecisiveness and how these accentuate Walter White's ego-driven descent. In *Better Call Saul*, this research examines Kim Wexler's ethical wavering and inconsistent motives and how this complicate Jimmy McGill's metamorphosis into Saul Goodman. Finally, a direct comparison highlights distinctions in how Gilligan deploys these dynamics in each show. Throughout, frequent quotations from the series' scripts will be used as evidence, focusing strictly on dialogue and narrative decisions rather than any visual aspects.

2 ANALYSIS OF CHARACTERS IN TWO WORKS

2.1 Jesse Pinkman in *Breaking Bad*

Jesse Pinkman is introduced in the pilot episode as a small-time methamphetamine cook and dealer, whose initial portrayal masks deeper moral complexity. Although he partners with Walter White in criminal enterprise, Jesse often displays compassion, guilt, and confusion. For example, in the second season's episode "Peekaboo," Jesse discovers two meth-addicted parents completely neglecting their infant son. He is horrified by the child's endangerment, confronts the addicts, and solemnly vows, "You two are never getting high again. I will make it my life's mission. Not another needle, not another ball ..." [3]. This line – delivered just after Jesse retrieves the frightened child – reveals a fierce moral indignation at drug abuse around an innocent. Even as a drug trafficker himself, Jesse instinctively becomes the child's protector. The writing here makes Jesse's conflicted stance explicit: he condemns Spooze and his wife as "bad parents" while quietly acknowledging, by his words, the injustice of their poisoning the baby. Gilligan's script thus portrays Jesse as neither purely villainous nor purely innocent, but a complex figure driven by empathy in one scene while being complicit in crime in another. Indeed, as one analysis notes for *Breaking Bad*, characters like Jesse force audiences to question the boundaries between right and wrong, underscoring how moral ambiguity is fundamental to the series' storytelling [4].

At the same time, Gilligan carefully scripts Jesse's lack of clear motivation. Unlike Walter White, whose goals (family security, professional respect, ego fulfillment) are progressively clarified, Jesse is often aimless. Early on, Walter cynically assesses Jesse's situation: "You lost your partner today... The DEA took all your money, your lab. You've got nothing" [5]. In response Walt ominously proposes a partnership: "I'm thinking... maybe you and I could partner up... You wanna cook crystal meth? You and me." [6]. Jesse readily jumps on Walt's offer – responding "Yeah, Mr. White!" with unrestrained glee – but he never articulates a personal long-term plan beyond immediate survival or excitement. His dialogue seldom expresses a clear ambition. Instead, Jesse tends to react impulsively. For example, in one scene he brusquely asks "Who cares?" when Walt urges caution, revealing a lack of serious long-term thinking. The writing implies Jesse drifts from one scheme to another because "that's the way his life has turned out," not because he aims to achieve a specific goal. This built-in vagueness in Jesse's motivation is pivotal: it accentuates Walt's own clarity (and growing arrogance) by contrast. As Walt becomes increasingly ego-driven, Jesse's muddled purpose highlights Walt's single-minded pride. Gilligan thus uses Jesse's indecision and wavering commitment as a narrative foil. Jesse may talk of doing something "different" or "better" at times, but these notions remain vague; in the series finale, Walt even taunts Jesse, "You still don't recognize who I am, do you? ... I did it for me" – words that Jesse doesn't dispute. Throughout, the scripts allow Jesse to be an unpredictable partner, lacking a rigid agenda, which in turn lets Walt's motivations (power and recognition) dominate the plot.

The dynamic between Walter and Jesse, built through dialogue and shifting roles, intensifies Walter White's arc. Initially Walt positions himself as the expert teacher and Jesse as the eager if hapless student. In the pilot, Walt lectures Jesse on chemistry and proudly claims expertise: "I know the chemistry... maybe you and I could partner up" [6]. Jesse, the clueless parolee, bursts with enthusiasm ("Yeah, Mr. White!"), enthralled by Walt's plan. Early episodes establish Walt as the boss, Jesse as the subordinate. But over time the roles begin to invert. By Season 4, Walt has grown narcissistic and dangerous, while Jesse often acts more ethically than Walt. Their conversations pivot accordingly: Walt increasingly panders to Jesse or lashes out, and Jesse alternately defies Walt or tries to get his approval. For instance, in the Season 2 finale, after Jane's tragic overdose (caused indirectly by Walt and Jane), Jesse is shattered. When Walt later rescues an unconscious Jesse in a hotel (Season 4), Walt weakly justifies his actions with ego ("I did it for me"), implicitly putting his self-interest above Jesse's welfare. Jesse's silence in response underscores Walt's moral collapse. In the final confrontation of *Breaking Bad* (Felina), Walt shocks Jesse with how far he has fallen. Jesse initially fears Walt's betrayal – when Jesse hears a rumor Walt is dead, he snarls "Seriously? You said he moved to Alaska" and laments Walt's deception – yet Jesse ultimately spares Walt's life after Walt urges Jesse to kill him. By refusing Walt's plea (and even forgiving him, in a way encapsulated by the script's terse note "I forgive you" [6] in Season 5), Jesse actively thwarts Walt's ego finale. In crafting these scenes, Gilligan's dialogue and pacing explicitly use Jesse's moral qualms and unpredictability to drive home Walt's journey: Walter's transformation into a ruthless kingpin is made more poignant because Jesse acts as a conscience and foil. Jesse's plea for basic decency and refusal to join Walt's final act both expose Walt's villainy and bring emotional weight to the climax. Thus, through carefully written conversations and role reversals, Jesse's ambiguity and aimlessness become key elements that both reflect and propel Walter's arc.

2.2 Kim Wexler in *Better Call Saul*

In *Better Call Saul*, Kim Wexler is introduced as Jimmy McGill's colleague and confidante – a by-the-book lawyer defined by her intelligence and strong ethics. Vince Gilligan and co-writers frame her initially as morally upright; she upholds legal norms at her firm (Hamlin, Hamlin & McGill) and resists Jimmy's schemes. However, Gilligan's script gradually reveals Kim's own moral ambivalence. Key scenes show her bending and breaking rules despite surface respectability. For example, in Season 2's "Switch," Kim commits a forgery and identity theft to help Jimmy sabotage a bank expansion by Mesa Verde. Later, in Season 5's pivotal episode "Wexler v. Goodman", her professionalism masks how deeply she has strayed: during a tense deposition, she challenges CEO Kevin Wachtell by noting she even owns a copy of the disputed property image, saying "I have a copy of it hanging in my office at home... a photo that looks remarkably like the official Mesa Verde logo" [7]. This scripted confrontation not only exposes Mesa Verde's unethical use of a Native American photo, but also shows how Kim has adopted some of Jimmy's aggressiveness. On the surface Kim remains a competent attorney, but in plotting with Jimmy she repeatedly crosses ethical lines – her actions are legally and morally complex. Critics note that Kim's evolution is marked by such ambiguities. Kim rationalizes morally dubious actions, blurring the lines between right and wrong [8]. Gilligan's writing thus positions Kim as both empathetic and cunning. In one scene after cheating an egotistical client, Kim explains to Jimmy almost casually that it was "just fun," underscoring how she downplays her own transgressions and her growing willingness to embrace a darker side [8]. In dialogues, Kim often masks internal conflict with pragmatism. Her tone may be flat or wry, but her words betray a willingness to manipulate situations if it serves her and Jimmy's ends. Thus, the scripts depict Kim as more nuanced than a simple straight-arrow lawyer.

Kim's inconsistent motivations further enhance her ambiguity. Gilligan's scripting never provides a tidy rationale for many of her risky decisions. Her primary motive seems an undefined mix: loyalty to Jimmy, desire for autonomy, frustration with corporate life, and a hidden thirst for excitement. At times she appears driven by idealism (defending a wronged client), at others by rebellion (participating in a con against Howard Hamlin). For example, when Kim suggests targeting Howard's

career in “Something Unforgivable”, the script gives no explicit justification – she simply steels herself and insists it must be done. Audiences can infer multiple possible motives (resentment of the legal establishment, thrill-seeking, or cathartic revenge), but Kim never spells out her true aim. This ambiguity is built into Gilligan’s character construction: Kim will confess to caring about ethical practice, yet simultaneously encourages and executes shady plans. Her dialogue hints at this conflict. In Season 5, after Kim and Jimmy finalize one of their schemes, Kim angrily tells Jimmy, “I can’t do this anymore... you turned you and me versus the bank into you versus me” [7]. Here Kim’s frustration spills out: she acknowledges her participation (“you turned you and me versus the bank”) yet blames Jimmy for making it personal. This line reveals how Kim’s motives have shifted – her emotional detachment to the law has broken down, but she still clings to some moral line. Academics have noted that by mid-series “Kim’s moral ambiguity grows over time [8], reflecting how her motivations become harder to pin down. In summary, Gilligan’s scripts consistently leave Kim’s true goals opaque. She alternates between social conscience (sometimes championing innocent clients) and self-serving rationales (“it’s fun”), making her motivations unresolved and contradictory.

Kim’s blurred ethics and shifting aims critically affect Jimmy McGill’s arc. In the writing, she begins as Jimmy’s conscience but becomes his co-conspirator, reinforcing his slide into Saul Goodman. Early on, Kim tries to dissuade Jimmy from his con jobs; her moral clarity serves as a check on him. However, as she becomes morally compromised herself, Jimmy gains tacit validation for his actions. This dynamic is highlighted in key scenes. In one confrontation (S5E6 “Wexler v. Goodman”), after their plan to discredit Mesa Verde has spun out of control, Kim explodes at Jimmy: “Oh, fuck you, Jimmy... I can’t do this anymore” [7]. This outburst shows her final break with her old self – she can neither fully condemn nor fully condone their scheme. Gilligan’s writing has thus made Kim both mirror and enabler of Jimmy’s transformation: her willingness to act unethically (even if under protest) pushes Jimmy forward. By the end, Kim’s moral ambiguity becomes intertwined with Jimmy’s destiny. For instance, in Bagman (S5E8) she voluntarily endangers herself to save Jimmy from cartel violence, demonstrating a blurred heroic-impulsive side. And her idea to ruin Howard signals that she now shares in the gratification of manipulating others – just as Jimmy does. The script-level portrayal ensures Kim’s uncertain motivations (whether altruistic, vindictive, or thrill-seeking) directly challenge Jimmy’s identity. Jimmy can always justify to himself that “even Kim did it,” which makes his transformation to Saul feel almost inevitable. In short, Kim’s unsteady ethical compass and hidden drivers not only create personal conflict in their relationship but also substantively reinforce the narrative of Jimmy’s change.

3 COMPARISON

Jesse Pinkman and Kim Wexler share important similarities as Gilligan’s deuteragonists, yet they function differently in each series. Both characters begin with relatively clear moral traits – Jesse as a guilty but caring outlaw, and Kim as a principled lawyer – and both become morally ambivalent. Each blurs the line between right and wrong in their own way. For Jesse, his ambiguity arises from his heart versus habit: he feels deep empathy (as with the neglected child) even as he continues in a brutal drug trade. Kim’s ambiguity instead emerges from a conflict between her loyalty/ambition and her ethics. In both cases, their dialogue is peppered with contradictions and unspoken motives. Jesse’s declarations (“never getting high again,” [6]) contrast with his later complicity in violent crimes, while Kim’s calm legal argumentation (about the Mesa Verde photo) hides her recent turn toward scheming. As one critic notes, “morally ambiguous choices” are central to both shows [6], and indeed both Jesse and Kim consistently act in ways that defy a simple label.

However, Gilligan deploys their flaws with distinct narrative aims. Jesse’s lack of clear motivation and impulsiveness serve to highlight Walter’s own trajectory. Walter’s decisions become sharper and more defined in contrast to Jesse’s vagueness. For example, in *Breaking Bad* Walt’s complete commitment to power is thrown into relief by Jesse’s aimlessness – Walt’s enemies are concrete and his moves calculated, whereas Jesse often has “nothing” beyond Walt’s plan [6]. Consequently, the drama comes from Walt molding or manipulating Jesse’s indecision to his advantage. In *Better Call Saul*, Kim’s unclear motives instead mirror and validate Jimmy’s transformation. Her own embrace of rule-breaking lets Jimmy feel less alone in his descent; her sporadic morality means that whether she pulls him forward or tries to pull him back is never entirely predictable. Importantly, the ways they challenge the protagonists differ: Jesse’s moral objections to Walt’s cruelty (though often ineffectual) expose Walt’s hypocrisy and selfishness, while Kim’s eventual complicity effectively sanctions Jimmy’s lawlessness. For instance, Walt frequently takes moral high ground over Jesse – he scorns Jesse’s reluctance – which in turn illuminates Walt’s growing hubris. In contrast, Kim alternately resists and encourages Jimmy, so that when she finally urges him on, her shift feels like a turning point that strongly drives Jimmy further down the Saul path.

Thus, Gilligan uses Jesse primarily to expose and intensify Walt’s traits (e.g., ego, ruthlessness), whereas he uses Kim to accompany and justify Jimmy’s transformation. Narrative structure reflects this: Jesse’s indecision often causes obstacles for Walt’s plans (heightening conflict and forcing Walt’s assertiveness), whereas Kim’s actions more often align with Jimmy’s schemes (heightening tension by adding her resources but also her doubts). Both serve to raise the emotional stakes: Jesse’s genuine feelings make Walter’s cold decisions more poignant, and Kim’s ambiguous loyalties make Jimmy’s eventual fate feel complex and earned. Kim’s moral ambiguity grows over time [8], just as Jesse’s does, but Gilligan weaves them differently into each protagonist’s arc. Ultimately, both deuteragonists’ flaws are crucial structural elements in the narratives, but they impact their protagonists in contrasting ways.

4 CONCLUSION

In *Breaking Bad* and *Better Call Saul*, Vince Gilligan deliberately writes his deuteragonists with moral ambiguity and uncertain motivation as a key dramatic device. Jesse Pinkman and Kim Wexler, though very different characters, both undergo ethical erosion and emotional conflicts that are left partly unresolved in the scripts. These traits are not incidental: they serve to heighten and clarify the leads' journeys. Jesse's wavering conscience and aimlessness amplify Walter White's descent into megalomania, making Walt's self-centered logic starker. Kim's fluctuating ethics and opaque objectives similarly intensify Jimmy McGill's metamorphosis by providing both complicity and conscience – pushing him toward, yet also reflecting on, his persona as Saul Goodman.

Throughout both series, Gilligan's dialogue-driven approach (as opposed to purely visual storytelling) uses these morally gray secondary characters to structure and deepen the protagonists' arcs. In Gilligan's words, characters are made more relatable by "blurring the distinction between hero and villain," and indeed Jesse and Kim embody this principle. By harnessing the deuteragonists' moral complexity, Gilligan ensures the protagonists' transformations feel earned and affecting. In short, the protagonists do not stand alone; their flawed counterparts both mirror and magnify their journeys, making the emotional payoff of each series all the more powerful.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lewis Robert Joel, Grizzard Matthew, Mangus Michael, et al. Moral clarity in narratives elicits greater cooperation than moral ambiguity. *Media Psychology*, 2017, 20(4): 533-556. DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2016.1212714.
- [2] Reeve, Johnmarshall. *Understanding Motivation and Emotion*. John Wiley & Sons, 2024.
- [3] Vince Gilligan. *Breaking Bad Dialogue Transcript S2:E6 "Peekaboo"*. 2009. <https://8flix.com/assets/transcripts/b/tt0903747/Breaking-Bad-episode-script-transcript-season-2-06-Peekaboo.pdf>.
- [4] Johnson, Paul Elliott. Walter White (ness) lashes out: *Breaking Bad* and male victimage. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 2017, 34(1): 14-28. DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2016.1238101.
- [5] Vince Gilligan. *Breaking Bad Dialogue Transcript S1:E1 "Pilot"*. 2008. <https://8flix.com/assets/transcripts/b/tt0903747/Breaking-Bad-episode-script-transcript-season-1-01-Pilot.pdf>.
- [6] Vince Gilligan. *Breaking Bad Dialogue Transcript S5:E1 "Live Free or Die"*. 2012. <https://8flix.com/assets/transcripts/b/tt0903747/Breaking-Bad-episode-script-transcript-season-5-01-Live-Free-Or-Die.pdf>.
- [7] Vince Gilligan, Peter Gould. *Better Call Saul Dialogue S5:E6 "Wexler v. Goodman"*. 2020. <https://8flix.com/assets/transcripts/b/tt3032476/Better-Call-Saul-transcript-506-Wexler-v-Goodman.pdf>.
- [8] Gendler, Jason. *Better Call Saul and the Cognitive Effects of Prequel Television Series*. *Projections*, 2025, 19(2): 44-62. DOI: 10.3167/proj.2025.190204.